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# GENDER EQUITY IN FAIRTRADE COFFEE PRODUCTION

## SYNOPSIS

This paper analyses the inclusion of female smallholders in Fairtrade coffee production networks. The effects of gender (in)equity on the livelihoods of female smallholders and measures for increasing the inclusion of women in Fairtrade coffee production are assessed.

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Development Themes

Wordcount: 4497

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## 1. Introduction

A recent trend in the Global South is the feminization of agriculture. In many countries female farmers grow most of the food but have very limited access to employment, property and income. Providing female farmers with equal rights to land and agricultural support can contribute to sustainable development and has the potential to feed up to 150 million additional people (Green, 2011).

Policy makers and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are trying to improve the vulnerability and livelihoods of smallholders. An increasing number of multi-stakeholder initiatives attempt to enhance labour and environmental standards through third-party certification. One of the most popular third-party certifications in the agro-food sector is the Fairtrade Labelling Organization International (FLO). This organization certifies different commodities produced by peasant cooperatives (Raynolds, 2014). One of the first and most prominent certified products grown in the Global South is coffee (Lyon et al., 2010).

With over 730.000 Fairtrade coffee farmers worldwide, almost half of all Fairtrade farmers are producing coffee (FLO, 2015a). Being the most important product for Fairtrade and a commodity in which gender oppression is rooted historically (Lyon, 2008), this paper focuses on gender equity in Fairtrade coffee production. The focus is hereby only on smallholders since the Fairtrade certification standards mainly evolved for an improvement of the livelihoods of small producers by market participation (FLO, 2011a). However, it needs to be recognized that a high proportion of coffee is grown on large plantations. The situation of female workers on coffee plantations would thus need further research.

This paper attempts to find out how gender equity has been acknowledged in Fairtrade standards and if these standards can increase gender equity in local coffee producer organizations. The main research questions are therefore:

- How are female smallholders involved in (Fairtrade) coffee production?
- To what extent can Fairtrade contribute to gender equity in smallholder coffee production and what are the effects on women's livelihoods?
- Which Fairtrade measures could enhance the empowerment of female smallholders?

Firstly, the current situation of women in smallholder agriculture as well as the implications of Fairtrade standards on their livelihoods are highlighted. Subsequently, the effects of gender (in)equity on the livelihoods of female smallholders as well as possible measures for an increased inclusion and sustainable development of women in Fairtrade coffee production networks are discussed on the basis of a SWOT analysis.

## 2. Inclusion of women in Fairtrade coffee production

### 2.1 Status Quo of women in smallholder agriculture and coffee production

A recent global trend is the 'feminization of agriculture'. Women in the Global South take on additional farming tasks and subsistence cultivation responsibilities that have been traditionally performed by men. One major factor is the immigration of men from rural areas in search of paid labour. However, the feminization of agricultural labour occurs within a context of agrarian decline and often places women in unfavourable work situations. Driving factors are decreasing farm incomes as a result of declining commodity prices and a loss of agricultural jobs (Lyon et al., 2010).

Women are discriminated in many ways in agricultural production. Their agricultural work tends to be invisible. It is considered simply as 'help' to the husband or as secondary to women's role in the provision of domestic labour. Moreover, female farmers and workers in developing countries are struggling in general with lower pay, less stable employment, sexual molestation and a double burden of wage labour and domestic responsibilities (Raworth, 2004). Patriarchal social relations determine women's livelihoods and inclusion in smallholder coffee production. Men have privileged access to property and income. Even though women are required to work in both the field and the home, they have very low access and control over their income as often the males are paid for the harvest and their wives' work. Finally, despite contributing to the majority of agricultural work, women are excluded from agricultural decision-making in the household (Lyon, 2008; Lyon et al., 2010).

Moreover, there is a gendered division of labour. Women perform traditionally more labour intensive, lower paid and individual work like picking and washing the coffee beans, while men carry out more technical and cooperative work like infrastructure maintenance (Lyon et al., 2010). The mechanization of agriculture can increase this gap, since women often lack the technical skills for mechanized work (Loconto, 2015).

According to McArdle and Thomas (2012), the power relations in which women live are present at four different, interconnected levels:

- 1) The household and family: Besides the gendered division of resources and labour, women lack access to education and physical mobility and do not have a say in decision-making.
- 2) The community: Class and race biases are notably oppressive of women's social beliefs and norms and restrict women's reproductive and sexual autonomy.
- 3) The market: The markets undermine women's access to land, labour, credit, technology and other resources.
- 4) The state: Government programmes and health services for women are often discriminatory by being poorly funded and in poor quality.

### 2.2 Fairtrade standards for gender equity

According to the International Institute of Sustainable Development (2013), "Sustainable development can only be achieved when both men and women have the opportunities to achieve the life they choose. Opportunities for life are underpinned by supportive environment and social systems." Thus, achieving gender equity is crucial for sustainable development.

Moreover, equity includes not only the absence of discrimination, but also an element of justice as an outcome of human interactions, knowledge and socio-technical factors. Socially constructed categories and gender roles contribute to inequity. However, in some situations gender is not the

main factor for inequity, rather is class, age or ethnicity (Loconto, 2015). Due to the limited scope of the paper, the author focuses mainly on gender equity and suggests further research on the generational and ethnical aspects of equity in Fairtrade smallholder production networks.

Fairtrade seeks to contribute to more equality and fairness in international trade by ensuring a greater proportion of sales revenue to producers through direct income as well as the Fairtrade social premium (McArdle and Thomas, 2012). Since women often perform the majority of agricultural labour and represent a large part (22%) of these producers, it is important that FLO also addresses female smallholders in its certification standards. FLO (2015b) states that it aims “to focus its efforts on building the capacity of women to participate equally in agriculture, earn a fair wage and ultimately generate the resources to diversify their income and opportunities.”

Besides the requirements for importers of Fairtrade coffee (e.g. direct purchase from certified small coffee farmers through long-term contracts and payment of a premium price), the producers also need to fulfil requirements. In order to participate in the Fairtrade network, they must be small family farmers, be organized in independent, democratic cooperatives and must seek ecological goals (Lyon, 2008). FLO intends to prevent discrimination against workers based on the content of ILO Convention 111 on Discrimination, which applies to all members and employed workers of the producer organization (FLO, 2011b). The cooperatives must have a democratic structure and transparent administration that enables effective control by the members and its board over the management, including the decisions about how the benefits are shared. FLO regulations state that there must be no discrimination regarding membership and participation, there must be a general assembly with voting rights for all members and an elected board, the staff must answer through the board to the general assembly and there must be one general assembly a year during which annual reports and accounts are approved (Lyon, 2008).

FLO distinguishes standards for democratically organized small farmers’ organizations like cooperatives or associations, and for hired labour. Thus, FLO considers wages and labour conditions for the certification of hired work (e.g. on plantations). However, in the smallholder coffee production labour standards are assumed to be unnecessary since the majority of labour is concluded to be family labour (Luetchford, 2008). Gender equity is mainly taken into account in FLO’s labour standards for hired labour, but not as much in its standards for small producer organizations (SPOs). In order to mobilize labour small farmers approach first their immediate family. The wives and children are called on to pick coffee in between domestic chores. Coffee picking is hereby considered as an agricultural task that is particularly suitable for women and children since it requires manual finesse rather than strength (Luetchford, 2008). Yet, the FLO standards avoid opening the black box of household relations. The standards do not tackle the work conditions of family labour and the distribution of economic benefits in the household (Lyon, 2008).

### 2.3 Measures for increased gender equity in Fairtrade coffee production networks

In FLO’s monitoring report (FLO, 2015a) the organization states that 19% of small coffee producers are women. This is a slightly lower percentage of women than the total amount of women who are working as Fairtrade smallholders (22%). More than 350k female farmers and workers are in certified Fairtrade organizations. FLO acknowledges that it can only contribute to increased gender equity when there are “targeted initiatives in place aimed at doing so, and where the leadership of the Fairtrade organizations support and promote this” (ibid.). The organization admits that it needs to do more to support the development and empowerment of women through targeted programming and cooperation with producer organizations. FLO is starting to increase its measures for gender equity by employing its first full-time gender expert in 2015 (ibid.).

### 2.3.1 Coffee producer organizations

“It’s important to be an active member of the association because it gives women the right to vote, to participate in decision-making, the right to receive benefits and to live with dignity. It gives women the right to say ‘It’s MY organisation’, not an organisation belonging to a small group, but everyone’s with the right to say what is good and what is bad.” - Female SPO member (FLO, 2015b)

In order to increase the participation of female smallholders in producer organizations, it is important that women understand how they can benefit from this affiliation. The inclusion of women in SPOs brings potential practical benefits such as better access to training, inputs and financial support, higher productivity of farms and income plus strategic and long-term benefits like greater economic independence, rights and influence for women, enhanced knowledge and confidence as well as improved leadership and governance of SPOs (Fairtrade Foundation, 2015a; FLO, 2015a). However, the participation in SPOs also bears risks for women, such as additional workload, a decline in their available time for care work and tensions within households and communities through challenging sociocultural norms (Fairtrade Foundation, 2015a).

In March 2015, the Fairtrade Foundation (2015a) launched a new study that shows how enabling more women to participate in producer organizations not only benefits women, but also supports development and improves business overall. The report found three main barriers for women’s inclusion in Fairtrade small producer organizations (SPOs): the producer organization’s rules and practices, sociocultural norms as well as the individual circumstances and choices of women.

Coffee production is historically a male dominated industry. Coffee farmers that are involved in Fairtrade cooperatives are predominantly men. One reason for this is that membership in SPOs is directly or indirectly connected to possession or registration of land or crops. This favours men who traditionally own and control more land than women. Additional education and production requirements exclude women further from participation. Moreover, leadership structures sustain this bias, since leaders are selected from the membership. The lack of gender awareness and gender policies in SPOs neglects women’s needs and interests (McArdle and Thomas, 2012).

In addition, Fairtrade promotes export crop cultivation in which earnings are often controlled by men due to the exclusion of women from the trading process. The result is that women are not financially rewarded for their labour in coffee production, while simultaneously family farm responsibilities and land ownership restrictions hinder them from managing farms of their own (ibid.).

Furthermore, women’s personal circumstances like age, marital status, education, wealth and the degree of support from relatives affect women’s choices and their participation in SPOs. These circumstances also influence their use of time and management of responsibilities. If female smallholders see sufficient benefits in participating in producer organizations, they are more willing to accept any trade-offs involved, i.e. an increased burden of work or disapproval from community members. However, many women do not see enough potential benefits. The complex interaction of barriers makes it difficult to predict whether women participate or not. These personal circumstances are also linked to national laws and policies, the nature of local institutions, market dynamics as well as international conventions and institutions (FLO, 2015a).

Due to their time-consuming, unpaid household responsibilities, women do not seek actively leadership roles within the cooperative since this would require attending frequent and lengthy meetings. In a survey (Lyon, 2008), female coffee smallholders stated that they would like to participate more in the local cooperative, but that they did not feel welcome in the SPO. However, women enjoy participating in female only organizations, in which they felt more welcome. This



shows that women are able to rearrange their household responsibilities for desirable forms of group participation.

The ability and willingness to include women in producer organizations is largely influenced by cultural tradition. Newer, specifically for Fairtrade founded cooperatives seem “more willing to provide opportunities for women to participate not only as producers, but also as cooperative leaders and managers” (Lyon, 2008).

Organizations’ structure and voting rights further enhance the lack of female participation in the democratic processes of Fairtrade cooperatives. The one vote per household curtails the women’s decision-making power in the public domain as well as it is usually given to the male head of the family due to patriarchal customs (Lyon, 2008).

In order to remove the barriers to women’s participation action by multiple parties is required. SPOs play a central role in this process and need to embed women’s inclusion in their specific context so that they can design and implement gender equity policies and action plans to address these barriers. FLO needs to work hereby closer with SPOs to provide support and incentives, which are currently both largely absent (Fairtrade Foundation, 2015a; FLO, 2015a).

### 2.3.2 Farm operator status

As a result of the feminization of agriculture and male immigration from rural areas in search of paid labour, the share of female farm operators is increasing. Due to Fairtrade certification measures such as receipt verification, on-farm inspections and farmer accreditations farmers need to be present. This forces absent (migrant) men to transfer their farm operator status to the women in the household in order to continue participating in the Fairtrade network. Being registered as farm operators allows these women to join SPOs and increases their access to networks, their income through receiving the higher Fairtrade price and easier access to property. Moreover, female farm operators can take part in the decision-making of the SPO and the distribution of the Fairtrade Premium (Lyon et al., 2010).

However, the farm operator status is mainly obtained when men migrate from rural areas in search for paid labour and transfer (Lyon et al., 2010). The drawbacks of becoming a farm operator are the required additional labour and financial outlays to cover certifications costs and meet high-quality standards (ibid.).

### 2.3.3 Fairtrade Premium

The Fairtrade social premium is a share of coffee income that is dedicated to a ‘social fund’ to finance infrastructure, development projects and operational costs (Lyon et al., 2010). Cooperatives often try to leverage additional resources for these social programmes from government agencies and NGOs. Some of these resulting projects in health, education, housing and other areas are targeted to producers while others include the community as a whole (Raynolds et al., 2004). Thus, the Fairtrade Premium can benefit women through tackling their burden of domestic responsibilities by improving access to clean water, healthcare and childcare as well as by purchasing labour saving devices such as mills (FLO, 2015b).

The guaranteed Fairtrade prices provide greater security and the social premium has funded development projects that free women from some unpaid labour and enables them to pursue more beneficial activities. One example is the establishment of a clean water supply within communities which frees up time that women would have spent on the collection of water (McArdle and Thomas, 2012).

#### 2.3.4 Market for women and initiatives

Since the Fairtrade Premium can also be invested in women's income generating activities not related to farming, it has the potential to create a market for women to sell e.g. their handicrafts. Because coffee production remains a male dominated economic activity, women feel that they do not have work in coffee cooperatives and desire an artisan market for themselves and their families (Lyon, 2008). Studies show that women are able to organize themselves in women's groups when they are excluded from decision-making and leadership in cooperatives. This can enhance the overall success of the cooperative, e.g. through setting up local bakery projects that complement the sale of coffee beans (Nelson and Pound, 2009).

Recently, FLO seems to have increased its efforts in fostering gender equity in Fairtrade coffee production. In January 2015, Fairtrade Africa and the Fairtrade Foundation launched a three-year project for empowering female coffee farmers in Kenya. The *Growing Women in Coffee* project will transfer the ownership of coffee bushes to 150 women coffee producers in a Kenyan cooperative with the aim to enable women to earn an independent income for the first time. 300 other women from another Kenyan cooperative that already benefitted from an asset-transfer programme will obtain training on good agricultural practices in order to increase their yields and quality of their coffee. Moreover, biogas units will be constructed for their homes, reducing smoke exposure and time spent collecting firewood. In addition, a coffee union, which brings together the above mentioned and 30 other cooperatives will be supported to develop and market a branded 'women's coffee'. This will give women the opportunity to brand their coffee for the domestic market. (Fairtrade Foundation, 2015b).

Moreover, female-only coffee cooperatives are emerging. Yet, this development will need further research in order to assess if the growing number of women's Fairtrade cooperatives indicates the failure of traditional organizations or adequately serves their interests. The impact of these female cooperatives on participants' livelihoods and well-being will require additional analysis (Lyon, 2008; Lyon et al., 2010).



### 3. Discussion of Fairtrade measures for gender equity

It can be concluded that Fairtrade is to some extent trying to foster gender equity through defining the empowerment of women as one of its ten key impact areas (Lyon et al., 2010). This goal is currently mainly achieved by prohibiting discrimination in SPOs and by encouraging development projects that benefit women through the Fairtrade Premium. However, FLO's standards against discrimination are quite generic and most SPOs do not have explicit gender policies and strategies. Besides these structural barriers, especially local, traditional norms and values hinder the inclusion of women in SPOs. Women are at domestic and public levels excluded from decision-making. Moreover, their domestic and agricultural labour for coffee production is not valued and often not remunerated. Thus, valuing women's work is most important for empowerment.

The author of this paper has constructed a SWOT analysis for assessing the development of gender equity in Fairtrade coffee production (Figure 1). The analysis shows that the FLO standards can specifically foster gender equity by investing the Fairtrade Premium in projects that benefit women. Other strengths are the higher and more secure Fairtrade prices, the possibility for valuing women's work by providing them the farm operator status, the democratic structure of cooperatives as well as their commitment to the ILO labour standards. Weaknesses are on the other hand the lack of explicit gender policies in Fairtrade organizations, the patriarchal structures in SPOs and the requirement of ownership of land or crops for membership in SPOs as well as the increased labour to fulfil the higher quality standards of Fairtrade.

Opportunities are the various benefits that the inclusion of women in SPOs can bring, the creation of markets for women through which they can earn an own income as well as the immigration of men from rural areas that leads to the transfer of farm operator statuses to women. A stronger integration of gender equity in Fairtrade's certification process and participatory monitoring represent further opportunities for increasing the empowerment of women. In order to promote gender equity, FLO needs to be aware of threats like the underlying gender values and norms in local communities that are often hard to change. In addition, a decline in coffee price bears the risk of women staying in lower paid jobs while men move on to pursue higher paid and skilled jobs. Another threat is the mechanization of agriculture that could increase the barriers for women further due to a lack of technical skills. Moreover, there is the possibility that women choose to not participate in Fairtrade and SPOs which results in a potential threat to Fairtrade's growth and its aim to increase gender equity.

	positive	negative
internal	<p><b>STRENGTHS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Fairtrade Premium → community projects that benefit women</li> <li>▶ Higher income</li> <li>▶ Valuing women’s work by giving them farm operator status</li> <li>▶ Democratic structure in cooperatives</li> <li>▶ ILO labour standards</li> </ul>	<p><b>WEAKNESSES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ No explicit gender policies or strategies in Fairtrade organizations</li> <li>▶ Women can only participate in SPOs when they are farm operators</li> <li>▶ Patriarchal structures in SPOs</li> <li>▶ More labour due to increased quality standards</li> </ul>
external	<p><b>OPPORTUNITIES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ New skills/jobs/education for women through SPOs</li> <li>▶ Immigration of men → transfer of farm operator status to women</li> <li>▶ Creation of markets for women</li> <li>▶ Stronger focus on gender equity in certification process</li> </ul>	<p><b>THREATS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Underlying gender norms in local communities</li> <li>▶ Declining coffee price</li> <li>▶ Mechanization of agriculture</li> <li>▶ Women’s preference to not be part of a SPO</li> </ul>

Figure 1: SWOT analysis of Fairtrade gender equity measures

### 3.1.1 Coffee producer organizations

Sarah Lyon (2008) argues that “the current Fairtrade network is falling far short of its goal to promote gender equity, particularly in three important realms: voting and democratic participation, the promotion of non-agricultural income generating programs, and support for female coffee producers.”

Fairtrade can contribute to increased gender equity when there are targeted initiatives and when the leadership of SPOs supports this cause. Without such support participation of women in cooperatives remains low. Despite the large lack of gender policies in SPOs, a growing number of Fairtrade cooperatives have started to introduce quotas for female participation and initiatives to build a more enabling environment for women (FLO, 2015b). Some coffee cooperatives actively promote women’s participation through gender issues training and the formation of female only associations. This is especially the case where many male members migrated in search of work or where communities have decided to actively require women’s participation (Lyon, 2008). Furthermore, newer cooperatives with less rooted power hierarchies are more willing to provide opportunities for younger generations with higher levels of education and more liberal understanding of gender appropriate behaviour. These cooperatives could perform an internal social auditing process in order to identify and correct deficiencies that also include gender inequities (ibid.).

However, there are still many organizational barriers that hinder women from joining SPOs like the fact that affiliation and voting rights are premised on one vote per property-owning family (ibid.). The author of this paper suggests here a possible solution of providing two voting rights per household (to the male and female head of the household). Yet, this idea will need further analysis regarding the influence of men on the voting decisions of women and the possibilities for anonymous voting in cooperatives.

Gender policies for SPOs could include e.g. promoting women’s right to benefit economically from their agricultural work, promoting equal treatment in communities by role models, supporting women to gain access to land and capital for coffee production, and facilitating women’s education and the creation of their own brand like in the *Growing Women in Coffee* pilot project (FLO, 2015a).

Finally, it is proposed to integrate the gender dimension in their participatory monitoring and evaluation by Fairtrade. (Nelson and Pound, 2009)

### 3.1.2 Farm operator status

Women can benefit the most from Fairtrade when they become registered farm operators, since this status increases access to organizations, property and income for female smallholders. However, the farm operator status is mainly obtained by women when men migrate from rural areas in search for paid labour. Even though, this status enhances women's access to various benefits, it also increases their labour and financial outlays for covering certification costs and fulfilling the high-quality commodity standards (Lyon et al., 2010). Moreover, further research is needed to determine the possibilities for women to receive the farm operator status when their husbands are not absent.

### 3.1.3 Fairtrade Premium

The Fairtrade social premium is one of the most significant measures for FLO to improve the livelihoods of female smallholders (McArdle and Thomas, 2012). As mentioned above, the premium is often used for community projects that benefit women directly and indirectly. However, if women are not members of the SPO they cannot decide on which the Fairtrade Premium is spent on (Lyon et al., 2010). Moreover, most academic articles focus on positive examples of Fairtrade Premium usage. Nevertheless, negative and unsuccessful cases should be analysed in more detail as well (McArdle and Thomas, 2012).

### 3.1.4 Market for women and initiatives

Sometimes the Fairtrade Premium and other funds are used to support women in establishing a market of their own. Women often welcome this since they wish to sell their products in order to receive their own income, which they can control. Moreover, many women feel uncomfortable working in the male-dominated coffee industry and prefer selling their handicrafts for income. Yet, it is difficult for these women to find a foreign market to sell their handicrafts and other products due to language barriers and a lack of experience (Lyon, 2008). Thus, FLO and SPOs should offer more support for helping women establish a market of their own to increase their own earnings and independence. Furthermore, women's economic success in non-coffee based income generating activities can increase their influence in cooperative decision-making, even though it is not clear if this also enhances their involvement in coffee production or control over its revenues (Nelson and Pound, 2009).

## 4. Conclusion

To sum up, it can be said that FLO has acknowledged the need for fostering gender equity through defining the empowerment of women as one of its ten key impact areas. However, Fairtrade's measures for achieving this goal are still in its infancy. Despite FLO's previous shortcomings regarding gender equity, the organization is specifically targeting this issue since 2015 with the employment of a full-time gender expert as well as new initiatives like the *Growing Women in Coffee* project. These aspirations give hope that Fairtrade will be able to increase the empowerment of female smallholders in the future. Yet, the research showed that Fairtrade can only influence the traditional gender relations to a certain extent in developing countries. Thus, a value and behavioural change of the underlying gender norms seems to be one of the most important prerequisites for empowering women. Moreover, FLO can support a structural change in patriarchal producer organizations, e.g. by introducing women's quotas, increasing women's access to land and crops and by participatory monitoring that also takes the interests of women into account. Another useful measure is the Fairtrade Premium, which can benefit women through community projects that contribute to sustainable development. Furthermore, the Fairtrade Premium can help female smallholders to create a market of their own, where they can sell their own products for increasing income and independence.

Nonetheless, the complexities of the barriers and measures for empowering female coffee smallholders through Fairtrade demonstrate the need for further research. Specifically the interests and circumstances of women as well as the generational and ethnical aspects of gender equity require a more detailed analysis.

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